

“They came to a place of darkness and brought light.”

The tragic collapse of Champlain Towers South in the Surfside neighborhood of Miami on the night of June 24 has hit the Jewish community particularly hard as many of the missing residents were members of local Orthodox synagogues.

FLORIDA

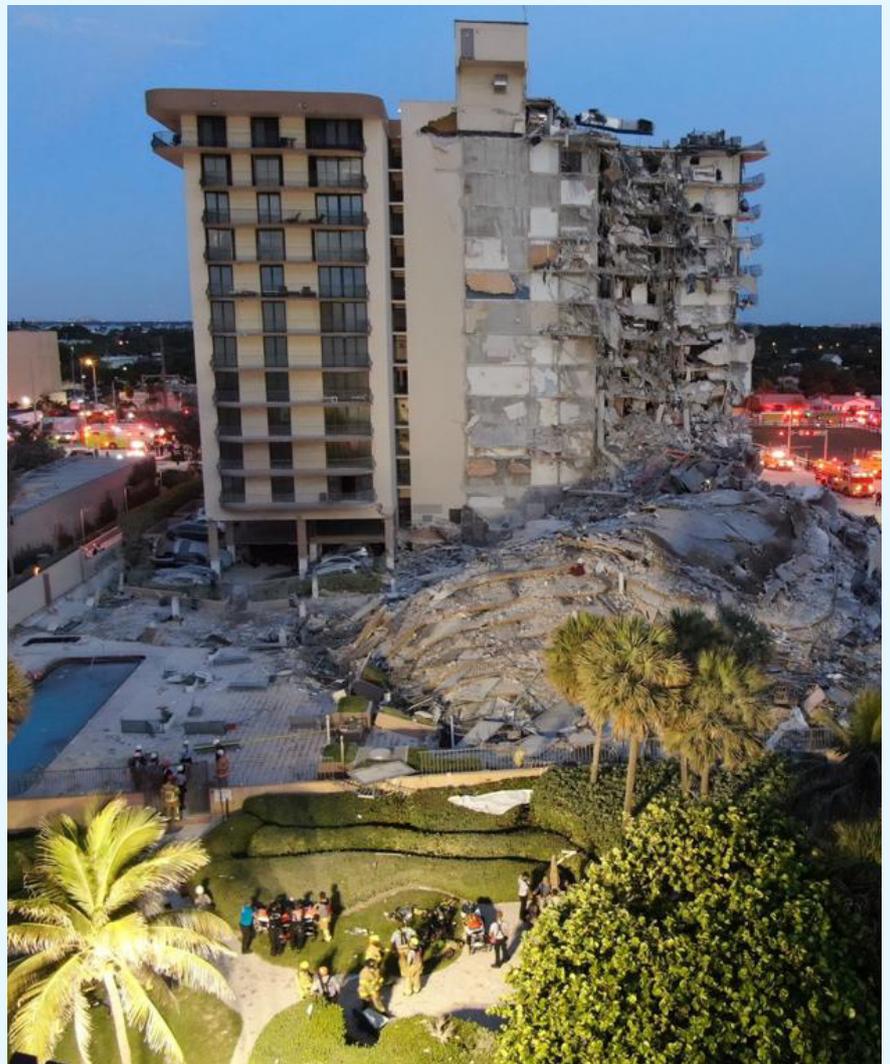


JOE ZEVULONI is an Israeli-American entrepreneur, founder of Simcha Layeladim (mywish4u.org) and organizer of Strong for Surfside, a volunteer network that provided thousands of kosher meals to first responders and family members of victims of the Surfside collapse.

When Champlain Towers collapsed, the Surfside community was devastated, literally overnight. How did Strong for Surfside, your network of volunteers, emerge from this horrific catastrophe?

When Champlain Towers collapsed, Surfside was in absolute chaos. The scope of what happened was overwhelming. Thousands of people were streaming into the community – relatives of the victims, emergency workers, rescue personnel, police and fire departments. All of this emergency personnel needed support; food, supplies and so on.

People were helpless, and government officials seemed vulnerable too. When I approached the mayor and other



bureaucrats in the area to tackle the logistical problems, I got nowhere.

Fortunately, we didn't have to wait for the government to get started. My friend, Eli Ginsburg, is the owner of Surf-n-Sides, a kosher restaurant in

Surfside's community center, about half a mile from Champlain Towers.

Together, we dove in and repurposed Eli's kitchen to prepare over 3,000 high quality kosher meals a day – teriyaki salmon, rib eye steak; you name it.

Hundreds of *kashrut*-observant Jews ate at the kitchen, but we also served thousands of others. Each day, we used golf carts to bring lunch boxes to the emergency workers at the site.

When the building collapsed and we began to realize the enormity of the situation, it struck me that we all have to join together and be strong for Surfside. So we made “Strong for Surfside” t-shirts and bumper stickers, and amazingly, it went viral. Within a few days, over a thousand volunteers had signed up to help from all walks of life. People who were vacationing in Florida and felt guilty about being at the beach came to volunteer.

Initially, we self-funded the project, and then friends joined in to help. Rabbi Sholom Lipsker and the Shul of Bal Harbour were a huge help as well. With their help, we were able to produce more than \$10,000 worth of food every day.

We tried to make the community center a home away from home for the families of the victims and the first responders. We made meals to order; Michael, who lost his daughter in the collapse, liked pastrami sandwiches, and the Patel family only ate vegetarian. The community center is where the families came for updates, and the police and other responders come to the center to recover after exhausting days at the site. Many police officers and firefighters took the “Strong for Surfside” stickers off the food boxes and added them to their uniforms.

As someone at the disaster site every day, what did it mean to you to see members of the Israel Defense Forces’ Home Front Command on the ground in Surfside?

Immediately after the collapse, many Jewish families that lost loved ones in Surfside pleaded with local officials to bring the IDF search and rescue team



One of the Israel Defense Forces National Rescue Unit at the site of the Surfside collapse (PHOTO: IDF)



IDF Col. Golan Vach with sacred Jewish books uncovered in the rubble (PHOTO: IDF)



Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and First Lady Casey DeSantis with Joe Zevuloni at the disaster site (PHOTO: STRONG FOR SURFSIDE)

to Surfside. To their credit, the local officials agreed. When the IDF arrived, the vibe at the disaster site immediately changed for the better; they were the only tactical army team at the site, and their confidence and competence boosted everyone’s morale. The US rescuers said that the Israelis brought a different approach, and within a few days, they had learned how to bolster their efforts with tactics they learned from the IDF.

As Jews, seeing Israel and the US working together was a massive source of pride. Israel, of course, is the “little brother” in the US–Israel relationship. But when the US is suffering, it is incredibly comforting to see how the “little brother” is there to help. I think we all understand this from personal experience. When you are suffering, having your family and close friends with you is deeply comforting. It’s not that the American personnel on the scene were incapable of doing the job independently. It’s simply friendship; when a friend is suffering, you need your friend to be there with you.

The American first responders working at the scene bonded with the Israelis; they felt a powerful kinship with one another. One day, while we were delivering lunches, one of the American captains approached me and asked: “where can we get Israeli patches for our uniforms?” I bought hundreds of patches with the flag of Israel and distributed them to the rescuers working at the scene, who attached the patches to their uniforms. One of the captains gave me his patch in return. It was an extraordinary moment.

It’s hard to describe how heartbreaking the Champlain Towers collapse has been for our neighborhood. We all lost friends in that building. But once again, the people of Israel showed that our nation is a source of light and friendship to the entire free world. They came to a place of darkness and brought light. ■